

Res Cogitans

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 12

7-30-2011

An Argument for a Reasons-Based Doxastic Voluntarism

Santiago Sanchez
Williams College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sanchez, Santiago (2011) "An Argument for a Reasons-Based Doxastic Voluntarism," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 12.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Res Cogitans by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.

An Argument for a Reasons-Based Doxastic Voluntarism

Santiago Sanchez
Williams College

Published online: 30 July 2011
© Santiago Sanchez 2011

Abstract

Intentional action is usually taken to be something that is paradigmatically under the direct control of our will. Belief-formation, on the other hand, is usually taken to be involuntary and not under our control. I, however, wish to argue that we have the same kind of control over what we beliefs we form as we do under what actions we intend, or more specifically, what intentions we form. In order to argue for this, I give what is sometimes called an “analogy argument” for doxastic voluntarism. I do this by first assuming and spelling out an account of intention-formation according to which action is a reasons-based activity, an activity we engage in by responding to reasons. According to this model of action, the will is the capacity to respond to the reasons we believe we have. I then assume that belief-formation is also a reasons-based activity and thus that it allows for the will to play the same role as it does in intention-formation. I end by spelling out how the way I construct the analogy escapes some of the usual objections analogy arguments and doxastic voluntarism faces.

Many philosophers see intentional action as a characteristically voluntary part of our lives and belief-formation as a characteristically involuntary part of our lives. This can cause us to worry that, since belief is not something that we can have any voluntary control over, perhaps we are not responsible for the beliefs that we have. This is a result that seems best to avoid, as we want to be able to hold people responsible for having dangerous and/or unjustified beliefs. In this essay, I want to try to avoid this result by arguing that belief-formation and intention-formation¹ are both under the direct control of the will, making what is sometimes called an “analogy argument” for doxastic voluntarism to the effect that the structure of intention-formation and belief-formation is the same due to their both being reasons-based activities and thus allow for direct influence of the will to the same extent. I will do this by first briefly spelling out an anti-Humean model of intention-formation according to which we are motivated by the normative beliefs we have, by the reasons for intention we believe we have. I then

¹ I focus intentions because I agree with Scanlon that “[a]ctions are the kind of things for which normative reasons can be given only insofar as they are intention, that is, are the expression of judgment sensitive attitudes” (Scanlon, p. 21). Furthermore, I think the interesting analog between belief and action is best construed in terms of belief-formation is intention-formation, which then result in beliefs and actions. Similarly, I agree that reasons for action “are not to be contrasted” (Ibid., p. 21) with reasons for intention.

proceed to spell out what the role of the will is in such a model of action and then argue that it plays the same role in forming beliefs.² After establishing this analogy, I will raise some traditional objections raised against doxastic voluntarism and analogy arguments for it and argue that the way the analogy is constructed here overcomes them.

Direct volitional control (DVC) over a response to our circumstances comes about when our will can directly influence what a response to our circumstances is. Intention-formation is usually taken to be the characteristic example of a response that the will can directly influence, but in order to see what DVC involves in intention-formation, we need to figure out what the role of the will is in intention-formation, so I will now give an account of this activity. For reasons of space, I will not give an extended defense of this account.³ Therefore, we should note the conclusions we draw about the role of the will in intention-formation and the analogy that we will draw regarding the role of the will in belief-formation are conditional on something like this account being correct.

Like Robert Audi, I think belief and action are “commonly grounded in reasons” (Audi, p. 93), and in taking this idea seriously for action, I think action is a reasons-based⁴ activity, an activity we engage in by responding to the reasons we believe we have. This entails an anti-Humean account of intention-formation that involves forming intentions that conform to our normative beliefs about the reasons for actions that we have. Thus, intentions are the mental states involved in action, which differentiate them from events in our body like reflexes, and we form intentions in response to reasons for intentions.

Now, we should look for what the role of the will is in this model of action. The will intuitively is the capacity for an agent to be active. Thus, in this anti-Humean model of action, in which intentions are formed in responses to reasons for intention, the will is the capacity to respond to reasons for intention we believe we have by forming

² It is worth noting that even opponents of doxastic voluntarism such as Robert Audi and Nikolaj Nottelmann note that the fact that belief “is sometimes, in some way, under indirect voluntary control is uncontroversial” (Audi, p. 93).

³ Such a defense would involve an account of why it should be preferred to the standard belief-desire model. It would also include an account of how *akrasia* is possible that is more fully developed than the one I shall give below, especially since the model holds intentions are always formed reasons and *akrasia* is admittedly irrational.

⁴ I should note that I assume a realist account of reason for action according to which reasons are considerations that count in favor of acting, see e.g., (Scanlon) or (Barry)

intentions,⁵ and thus is importantly tied to our normative beliefs. We should therefore investigate what the role of this capacity is in different kinds of action in this model, which I will do by discussing three different kinds of intentions: (1) unreflectively formed intentions, (2) intentions formed in response to a consciously entertained normative belief, (3) intention formed as a result of a deliberative process.

(1) Unreflectively formed intentions are those intentions involved in conscious but automatic action and which we form without consciously entertaining the reasons for them, and we saw the role they played in our discussion of virtue control. It may seem obvious that the will plays no role in these intentions, since they are automatic. However, the fact that upon reflection we believe we have reason for these intentions, and the fact that the will is importantly tied to our reasons should make us reconsider. A significant amount of our unreflective intention formations are habits that we have developed. Developing a habit in part involves doing something that we think we have reason for in certain circumstances repeatedly. As we do this, we come to form a normative belief that whenever we are in certain circumstances, we have most reason to act in a certain way, and so we can come to automatically respond to those circumstances in the way our belief prescribes without having to consciously entertain that belief. Therefore, our unreflectively formed intentions are still responses to our normative beliefs, but normative beliefs that we do not consciously entertain. Insofar as they are still responsive to our normative beliefs and our will aligns itself with our normative beliefs, it seems that these automatically formed intentions involve an implicit licensing of the will.

We can see this implicit licensing of the will in our unreflective intentions in that we can and do stop forming them whenever we become aware of or think there are features of our circumstances that may provide us with reasons against these intentions or stronger reason for other competing intentions. For example, say I have developed a habit of unreflectively intending to grab a carton of milk and drinking from it in the morning. I stop forming such unreflective intentions if I think that there is something wrong with the circumstances because of the smell of the milk or the color of the carton, which would make me become aware of potential reasons against forming that intention. The fact that when I stop believing I have good reason to form such unreflective intentions, I stop forming this intention shows that these actions involve an

⁵ Some philosophers like R. J. Wallace hold that the will should not be so tied to normativity, so that “one should not identify the act of choice [willfully forming an intention] with the acceptance of a normative judgment” (Wallace, p. 88). The reason why I do not think that this view is plausible is because it allows for free intention-formation that does not conform to one’s normative beliefs, i.e., clear-eyed *akrasia*. This would involve freely and deliberately doing something that you yourself recognize is not the best thing to do given your circumstances, which implies some sort of compulsion since intuitively you would do what you recognize is the best thing if you were completely free.

implicit licensing of the will since the will is tied to our normative beliefs, such that it does not normally⁶ form intentions, which we recognize we have reason not to form.⁷

(2) Intentions we form in response to consciously entertained normative beliefs are a straightforward example of the will's doing its standard role by being active as a capacity to respond to reasons for intention by forming intentions in response. We tend to consciously form these intentions as (3) a result of a deliberative process, but there are examples of this kind of spontaneous intention-formation, such as when I honestly remind myself that there is reason to eat vegetables as I pass the salad bar and in response put salad on my plate. Deliberation in this model of action, in which we respond to our normative beliefs, comes in when we do not believe there is one possible course of action there is clearly most reason for, since if we did, we would form an intention in response to such a normative belief. Deliberation therefore involves looking for reasons, and engaging in deliberation is itself an intention formation. Therefore, intending to deliberate may ensue as a response to a consciously entertained normative beliefs such as "I should figure out what to do here," or it may be unreflectively formed in response to a circumstance where we do not see what possible action to intend due to a previously formed belief such as "whenever I am in such a circumstance in which I do not see what there is most reason to do regarding a subset of different possible intentions, I should look for reasons for and against these intentions."

When we intend to deliberate, therefore, whether it be unreflectively or consciously, we look for reasons for and against possible actions, and deliberation can end in one of two ways: either (a) we come to believe there is most reason to do something, or (b) we come to believe there is more than one possible action with roughly the same reason-giving force. In (a), we consciously entertain this belief that there is most reason to form a possible intention and then form the intention in response to it, which is the standard role of our will. In (b), however, we have two normative beliefs about reasons with equal reason-giving force, so when we are in this position, and we have reason to make a choice (as opposed to abandoning the deliberation altogether), we find another task for the will, which is finalizing deliberation through a tie-breaking choice. There are several ways to break this tie, but since the will must respond to reasons, it will tend to involve allowing considerations that would not normally be relevant, such as flipping a coin, or a curious feature of a possible intention to give one of the intentions slightly more reason-giving force in this specific circumstance. For example, if a person is deciding whether to buy one kind of cereal or another, and she considers the cereals to be equally good, her will can allow for one cereal box's being blue to make it more

⁶ Cases where this happens would involve practical *akrasia*

⁷ For reasons of space, I focus on unreflective habitually formed intentions, but I think a similar thing can be said for other unreflectively formed intentions. They involve an implicit licensing of the will to the extent that we believe there is reason for and no strong reason against them.

reason-giving even though she recognizes that in circumstances not involving a tie, it would not be a relevant consideration.⁸

Above we painted a picture of action in which the will was the capacity to respond to reasons for intention by forming intentions, and we saw how it manifested itself by (1) implicitly licensing unreflective intentions (2) responding to consciously entertained normative beliefs about intentions by forming intentions (3) finalizing deliberation by making a tie-breaking choice between two equally reason-giving intentions. With this model of action in mind, I think we can construct a plausible model of belief-formation. To do this, we can make explicit the plausible assumption that I have been working with that both forming intentions and forming beliefs are responses to our circumstances. We can also note that belief-formation, like intention formation is also “grounded in reasons.” With these two points in mind, we can claim that belief-formation is an activity in which we engage by responding to reasons given by our circumstances, a reasons-based activity. Note that this is not claiming that belief-formation is voluntary yet, as it could just count as an automatic activity performed by, e.g., our cognition without our consciously interacting with it.

If intention-formation and belief-formation are both reasons-based activities, we can generalize what the role of the will is and claim that the will is the capacity to respond to the reasons for different responses to our circumstances we believe we have, where responses can be either forming beliefs or forming intentions. In order to back up this claim, we should look to see if the model of belief as a reasons-based activity allows for the will to play the same role it did in the case of intention-formation, i.e., in belief-formation the will must manifest itself by (1) implicitly licensing unreflective belief-formation, (2) responding to consciously entertained normative beliefs about beliefs by forming beliefs (3) choosing what to do between to equally-reason giving beliefs.

(1) It is plausible to claim that most of the beliefs we form, we form automatically without having to deliberate about them, as in the case of perceptual beliefs, so most belief-formation is unreflective belief-formation. In order to show that these unreflective belief-formations are implicitly licensed by the will then, we need to see if we stop forming these beliefs when we become aware of or think there are features of our circumstances that may provide us with reasons against these actions or stronger reason for other competing beliefs. For example, I automatically form perceptual beliefs in response to perceptions because perceptions give me strong reasons for such beliefs such that when I perceive a color patch, I form the belief that the color patch is indeed that color. I can stop forming such unreflective beliefs if I think that there is something wrong with the circumstances because there are many different colored

⁸ The reason why the will and not some other faculty allows such normally irrelevant considerations to be normative in these cases is because insofar the will is the capacity we have to respond to the reasons we believe we have, it should allow us to respond to these reasons even when these are equally strong.

lights shining on the color patch, which would make me become aware of potential reasons against forming that belief. The fact that when I stop believing I have good reason to form such beliefs, I stop forming this belief shows that forming these unreflective beliefs involves an implicit licensing of the will since the will is tied to our normative beliefs, such that it does not normally⁹ form beliefs, which we recognize we have reason not to form.

(2) Beliefs we form in response to consciously entertained normative beliefs about our intentions are a straightforward example of the will's doing its standard role by being active as a capacity to respond to reasons for belief by forming beliefs. As with intentions, we tend to consciously form these beliefs as (3) a result of a deliberative process, but there are examples of this kind of spontaneous belief-formation, such as when I honestly remind myself that there is reason to trust my friend as I listen to her seemingly implausible story and in response form the belief that what she is telling me is true. Similarly, deliberation in this model of belief-formation in which we respond to our normative beliefs about beliefs, comes in when we do not believe there is one possible belief there is most reason for. As with intention-formation, doxastic deliberation can ensue as a result of an unreflective intention or a conscious intention in response to a conscious normative belief, and like practical deliberation, it involves looking for reasons for and against possible beliefs and can end in one of two ways. Either (a) we come to believe there is most reason to believe something, or (b) we come to believe there is more than one possible belief with roughly the same reason-giving force. In (a), we consciously entertain this belief that there is most reason to form a possible belief and then form it in response, which is the standard role of the will. In (b), however, we require a tie-breaking choice between two possible beliefs we believe are equally reason-giving unless we are to abandon this deliberation altogether, which is another task for the will.¹⁰ As in intention-formation, there are several ways to break this tie, but since the will must respond to reasons, it will tend to involve allowing for considerations that would normally not be relevant, such as flipping a coin or a curious feature of a possible belief to give one of the beliefs slightly more reason-giving force in this specific circumstances. For example, if a person is deciding whether to believe one theory or another that she considers capture the data equally well and which seem to be backed by different theoretical virtues in a way she considers the beliefs to be equally good, her will can allow for one theory's painting a picture of the world she

⁹ Cases where this happens would involve theoretical *akrasia*

¹⁰ One common case when we find ourselves in these circumstances is when we are theorizing and must choose between two different theories. I should note that in belief-formation we may have reason not to form a belief at all in these tied cases, which may not happen as much in intention-formation, but there are cases where our beliefs have practical import where we have more of a reason to choose a belief than to abandon belief-formation about the matter.

finds more cheerful to make it more reason-giving even though she recognizes that in circumstances not involving a tie, it would not be a relevant consideration.¹¹

With this model of belief-formation and intention-formation then we can see that forming beliefs and forming intentions involves the same direct involvement of the will, in which the will is the capacity to respond to the reasons we believe we have. Thus, we have DVC, the capacity for our will to directly influence what beliefs and intentions we form are to the degree that we believe we have reasons for belief and intentions. Let us now turn to objections to doxastic voluntarism. William Alston offers a simple argument against voluntarism, which consists of asking the reader whether she has the power “to take up propositional [including beliefs] at will” (560), and the result is supposed to be that she will admit she cannot (Alston, p. 122). Presumably the bite behind this argument is supposed to be that, unlike beliefs, we can form intentions at will. However, with a reasons-based conception of action and belief and the role that the will plays in them, we can escape this argument. For example, it seems clear to me that I can in fact form many beliefs at will such as the belief that there are no pink elephants, the belief that I am not a parrot, and other beliefs that I believe I have very strong reasons for, and I do so by considering the reasons there are for and against these beliefs and responding to the reasons I believe I have.¹² True, I may not be able to form many beliefs at will, even if I am offered a million dollars, such as the belief that I am Napoleon, but that is because my will is aligned with my normative beliefs which hold that such a belief is one I have strong reason against. The same thing applies to intentions, however. I cannot intend to kill my parents at will, even if I am offered a million dollars, because my will is tied to my normative beliefs which hold that is an intention I believe I have very strong reason against. Therefore, Alston’s simple argument does not establish that belief is any less voluntary than action, since we can form beliefs and intentions at will to the same degree, to the degree that our normative beliefs license them.

Nikolaj Nottelmann offers a different argument against doxastic voluntarism. He considers a situation where Sam is on a jury and deliberates about whether to believe a witness’s statements (*p*) which would mean the defendant would have to be innocent or the prosecutor’s insinuations that the witness lied (*not-p*), and decides to believe the witness, voting to acquit (Nottelmann, p. 572). Nottelmann notes that in this example, Sam’s intentions are only involved in his beginning to deliberate and emphasizes that “nowhere did an intention or *effective decision* to believe that *p* enter the stage” (Ibid.,

¹¹ One may argue this is something there is reason against this, but the fact remains that the person can form this belief if it is rationally permissible by her own lights, so she can do it voluntarily.

¹² One may object that all these are unconscious beliefs that I previously had. However, this seems unconvincing because there is an infinite number of these beliefs, and attributing an infinite number of beliefs to a finite being is implausible.

p. 573), since Sam simply “reached a point where he consciously believed that he had good and sufficient epistemic reasons to believe that *p* and this second-order belief again induced in him the belief that *p* (Ibid., p. 73). Even though for Nottelmann both intentions and beliefs are responsive to reasons, the key difference for him is that intention-formation involves an extra reason-independent volition whereas belief-formation is merely a response to reasons. He thinks this is so because of practical *akrasia*, as he says, “there are many cases, where I hold it most desirable to perform a certain actions, yet [am] too lazy or irrational...and thus form no intention (Ibid., p. 576). This conclusion, however, depends on two things, (a) the assumption that theoretical *akrasia* is impossible, and (b) the assumption that practical *akrasia* shows there is always a reason-independent volition in intention-formation. However, with the reasons-based conception of action and belief and the role that the will plays in them, we can escape this argument if we can accommodate either practical *akrasia* or theoretical *akrasia*, since Nottelmann accepts a reasons-based account of belief. Although I think that these reasons-based models can accommodate both, I can only offer a sketch of an account. In this model, *akrasia* involves responding to certain reasons that we ourselves believe are not our strongest, and we respond in this way because they are particularly psychologically vivid reasons, such as comfort or habit. Therefore, *akrasia* is still a response to the reasons we believe we have, but a response to reasons we ourselves recognize as relatively weak compared to others. When the reasons involved are reasons for intention, *akrasia* is practical, and when the reasons involved are reasons for belief, *akrasia* is theoretical. Therefore, if this account of *akrasia* is right, we can escape Nottelmann’s objections and claim that on a reasons-based model, belief-formation and intention-formation are perfectly analogous and thus if this reasons-based model is correct, doxastic voluntarism is true.

References

- Alston, W. P. (1989). “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification.” In W. P. Alston (Ed.), *Epistemic justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Audi, R. (2001). *Doxastic Voluntarism and the Ethics of Belief, Knowledge, Truth, and Duty* (pp. 93-111). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barry, M. (2007). “Realism, Rational Action, and the Humean Theory of Motivation.” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice: An International Forum*, 10(3), 231-242.

Nottelmann, N. (2006). "The Analogy Argument for Doxastic Voluntarism." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 131(3), 559-582.

Scanlon, T. (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Wallace, R. J. (2006). *Normativity and the Will: Selected Papers on Moral Psychology and Practical Reason*. Oxford New York: Clarendon Press.